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Wiki Post #1

2/21/12

Kaffir Boy

Mark Mathabane

Mark Mathabane and his family live in Alexandra, South Africa. Mark’s early life is plagued by frequent visits from the Peri-Urban. They go around Alexandra looking for blacks who don’t have their pass cards completed. In the first encounter in the story, Mama frantically searches for her passbook, then escapes from the house to hide in a nearby ditch. Mark is terrified of the police, but they decide not to enter the house, believing that there were only children who lived there. The second time they arrive they enter the house and find Papa hiding under the bed. They take him away for not having his pass book in order. He is away for two months working on a white man’s farm as a punishment. At this time, visits from the police are common in Alexandra. Then, the Mathabane family is forced to move after their shack collapses. At this shack Papa strictly enforces the tribal rules because he believes that eventually the Africans will return to their old way of living.

One day, on his way to find a new job, Papa is arrested for unemployment. The family struggles without Papa and are forced to go without food. The children do not get to celebrate Christmas that year which greatly disappoints Florah. The family goes to the dump to find scraps like food and furniture, but after they come across a dead baby, Mama decides not to take the family there anymore. Finally, Papa comes back after being away for months. Soon after he returns, the family attends a meeting for Christians, but Papa does not approve of their teachings and forces the family to leave. Mama and Mark were disappointed, as they were intrigued by the Christian speeches. The family continues to suffer with little money, and is forced to eat locusts. Mark is frustrated with this and decides to take up an offer from a couple of his friends. They told him that he could make money and get food if he went with him. He is appalled to find that the boys are prostituting themselves, and escapes, deciding to tell no one of what he has seen.

Mama and Papa agree that the family’s financial problems are due to witchcraft. They decide to move the family back to the homelands and begin to see a witch doctor. Maria, the youngest daughter starts to get sick, and Mama takes her to the clinic. While Mama is away Mark and his friends go around making fun of the “shit men”, but they end up paying for it. Papa is unemployed once again, and goes to the witch doctor along with Mark to see if she can lift the curse that is on their family. A little while later Mama gives birth to another baby, a girl. The family struggles even more having to provide for yet another child.

I found the beginning of this novel to be very eye-opening. Prior to reading this I did not know the severity of life in apartheid South Africa. The Mathabane family is forced to live in fear of the police, and their lack of money grows worse and worse until starvation is the norm for them. So far, the book has been somewhat of a downward spiraling rollercoaster ride, as defined by their achievements and struggles. Once one good things happens to them, something much worse occurs, and the Mathabane’s struggle even more than before. For example, when Papa is finally able to go out in to town to search for a job he is arrested and taken away for not having his passbook completed and being unemployed.

One thing that confused me is the fact that Mama kept having children despite the fact that their financial situation was obviously poor. So poor, in fact, that they could not afford to feed the children that they already had. It’s not as if she did not know how to prevent pregnancy, so why continue having children? Also, what does Papa think of the situation? He does not take a liking to the children quite like Mama does, and I would think that he would not want anymore especially when he is the one providing for the family. My guess is that this was a familiar problem in South Africa during that time; couples would continue to have children despite their living conditions. This would create more struggles for the families, including contracting diseases when the babies were not properly cared for.

The innate human characteristics displayed in this book are raw and deeply rooted. The Mathabane family has close to nothing and is barely making it by day after day. Their aspirations and goals are not altered by unnecessary materialistic desires. The characteristics that span time and culture that are shown most in this story are maternal instinct and the desire for better quality of life.

Throughout the beginning of the novel, Mama is always depicted as a mother that will stop at nothing for her children. She is always fighting through the struggles in attempts to maintain a good life for her children. At one point, she is forced to care for her family herself after Papa is arrested. She finds a job doing laundry and still manages to care for her three young children. After she gives birth to her fifth child, the family’s financial situation is worse than ever before. One would think that Mama would be tired of taking care of the needs of five children through such a difficult time, but her character never portrays any doubts. She tries to make the best out of every situation that she is thrust into, solely for her children. Maternal instinct is a human characteristic that spans time and culture.

Another evident characteristic is the desire for a better life. Humans are always looking for the “greener grass” in hopes to achieve a better life for themselves. In the Mathabane’s situation, they are certainly trying to achieve that, but their definition of a better life is far different than most. Both Papa and Mama’s persistent attempts to find employment and housing show that they are always looking to improve the conditions for themselves and their children.

The ever present roles of men and women are shown in this novel relative to the time period. The women in Alexandra were responsible for child rearing and maintaining the house, while the men held positions in the workforce. The command of men over women is also shown, especially through the disagreements with Mama and Papa. When Mama took the children to listen to a Christian speech, Papa did not approve. He told Mama that if he ever hears her teaching his son about that nonsense again then he will cut her tongue out. Papa had absolute authority in the household, and Mama was not to question it. These roles have changed in recent years, and are close to extinct now, but there are still defining roles for both men and women.